New ID cards still have glitches, several Pacific bases report problems

By Rick Chernitzer, Stars and Stripes
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The military's newest identification cards look more like a badge, but the innovation goes beyond their appearance.

Defense officials are lauding the "common access card" as a high-tech "smart" card. It's expected to allow users to access buildings, computers, electronically "sign" documents and perform numerous other functions.

The Pentagon wants to have one in every eligible person's hands by September 2003, replacing the traditional green ID cards. Since November, more than 610,000 cards have been issued.

Some bases in the Pacific already have begun issuing the new cards to their military and civilian personnel. But like anything new, the transition hasn't been perfect, officials said.

Robert Green, ID card verifying officer and the CAC system's primary operator at Camp Zama, Japan, said the system came on line there in early March. Since then, they've issued more than 100 cards, Green said.

Some days, the system moves masterfully, spitting out cards with little difficulty. Other days, he said, the system is a bit shaky, due mainly to network problems.

"The system does run slower overseas than in the United States," he said.

The network problems usually involve the encryption process, required to put information on the card, Green said. He said the system has signals that tell the operator if the card is being properly processed. If certain indicators don't come up green, "the card needs to be terminated."

After he gets 20 bad cards, Green said he's required to send them to the United States for testing.

Yokota Air Base began issuing the cards on May 6, according to Air Force Master Sgt. Evelyn Cuaresma, 374th Mission Support Squadron customer service superintendent. Her office produces about 20 cards a day.

Yokota hopes to get the cards to all authorized users by October, Cuaresma said.

"The normal process for the reader to download … to the chip is about four to five minutes," she said, adding that it can sometimes take up to 30 minutes or longer. "There could be a server problem or system problem that we don't know about."

Yokota has experienced problems with the encryption procedure as well, she said. Sometimes, the operation fails, rendering the card digitally useless. At $8 each, that can be costly. "You do it four times to get it right, you've just blown $32," she said.

In the first few weeks, Cuaresma said, they also sent the cards back. But facing a dwindling supply, her office got permission from Yongsan Garrison to issue the flawed cards to service members. Yongan is the contact for the Pacific Air Forces' Defense Enrollment Eligibility System (DEERS).

She said that while the cards are valid identification, they can't be used to access doors and computers. "That technology isn't available on base here yet," Cuaresma said.

She said these "little bugs" are being worked out. For example, when her office encounters an error code, they call the communications squadron, which logs the error and tries to correct it.

Cuaresma likes the new cards, calling them "high-tech."

"It's just like a credit card," she said. "We're getting used to it."

Navy officials at the Personnel Support Activity on Yokosuka Naval Base, Japan, said in a prepared statement that all card-issuing facilities in the Pacific region, with the exception of Diego Garcia, are on line with the program.

"For the most part, CACs are being issued as planned, and within the issuance times planned, with a few exceptions," officials said.

"Like any other new system, there are bugs to be worked out and we are working closely with the Department of the Navy Business Operations Office to resolve them as necessary. We are on board with DOD's schedule to complete initial CAC issuance to all CAC recipients prior to" October 2003, officials said.

Navy officials also said they are working on "a Web scheduler tool" that will allow customers to reserve a time to get a card and avoid the long lines.

— **Scott Scho nauer contributed to this report.**